



# Shaunte's Story

## Love that is Unconditional

The first time Shaunte went to prison, she was fifteen years old. Two years before that, she gave birth to a child after repeated sexual assaults from her stepfather. Shaunte and her daughter lived together in foster care while Shaunte's life revolved around three things; her daughter, her anger, and cocaine. Always in search of her next high, she earned money in the only way she knew how. The charges that landed Shaunte in juvenile detention and eventually prison were tragic, violent, and true.

Throughout her first twelve years in prison, Shaunte was widely regarded as one of the most difficult, angry, and aggressive prisoners in the Oklahoma women's system. Consistently, she chose to fight. She received countless misconduct reports and was placed in segregated housing multiple times, her longest stint lasting two years and fourteen months. Her anger was the driving force behind every action.

Then, in July of 2006, at 27-years-old, Shaunte was released from prison.

A first taste of freedom was not wasted on Shaunte. But anger about her lost childhood compelled her to self-medicate in almost every destructive way imaginable. She had another child. This daughter was born addicted to four different drugs and was immediately removed from Shaunte's custody. One and a half years after her release, Shaunte was in handcuffs, in the back of a police car, riding back to prison.

That was the moment that Shaunte relinquished control of her life. "That was the end," she says. "I said, 'Jesus, save me.' "

Seven years later, Shaunte cries while she remembers, "Right away, I experienced peace that passes all understanding. That was the point where this God that I had heard about all my life, the God who parted the Red Sea and sent his son, revealed himself real to me."

By the time she arrived back at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center, news had spread of the radical change in Shaunte. Guards and prisoners clamored over each other to see her. While she served another six years, she never got in trouble. Instead, she took courses and her college entrance exam. She attended church services and distributed scriptures. And she says, "Every day that God walked with me through that sentence, I was able to say, 'This is what happened to me. It's Jesus.'" According to Shaunte, "God didn't waste all those misconducts from before, all those days in segregation, all those times of being

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strapped down, he never wasted it" because her "before" story gave her "after" testimony an undeniable weight.

In 2014, Stand in the Gap's Women in Transition course was not yet offered at Mabel Bassett. But the Women in Transition Program Manager, Rhonda Bear, had another way into the facility. The two women had first met while they were incarcerated together during Shaunte's first sentence. At that point, Shaunte says, "Rhonda was a church girl. We had nothing in common." When Rhonda volunteered at the prison's Kairos weekend, she saw Shaunte again.

Shaunte said, "I told Rhonda that I gave my life to the Lord and she said, 'It's about time. I've been praying for you for a long time.' God used her in my life in a way that was huge. She had been in my shoes and she kept telling me, 'You are going to make it. You are going to come to my transitional home in Claremore when you get out. I'm going to surround you with a team of mentors' and I was like, *what is she talking about?*"



Shaunte (right) with her mother, daughter, and granddaughter.

**T**en months after her second release from prison, Shaunte is sitting in a room with her Stand in the Gap small group. She is living in Rhonda's transitional home. She works three jobs and is attending Tulsa Community College, studying advanced manufacturing. She regularly attends Celebrate Recovery and First Baptist Church of Claremore. Shaunte talks openly about her life before Christ. And as she remembers the charges that first landed her in prison and the way she behaved there, it is nearly impossible to reconcile those stories with the respectful, smiling, empathetic, teachable, joyful young woman who is talking. Over the course of their time together, Shaunte's Stand in the Gap small group has given her practical advice and assistance. They helped her prepare for her driver's test, develop plans to open her business (an odd-jobs service), understand and create a personal budget, and care for her mother as she moved into a nursing home.

When they sit at the table, talking about their times together and Shaunte's life before they knew her, they laugh and cry with equal ease. Each of the volunteers can say, "We look at her like a daughter."

After many hours of practicing with her Stand in the Gap small group, Shaunte passed the test to receive her driver's license. While she was waiting to have her photo taken at the tag agency, Shaunte's phone buzzed with a Facebook notification. It was a message from her oldest daughter.

**S**haunte drove herself and her mother to see her daughter for the first time in 21 years. In the car ahead of her, two of her Stand in the Gap volunteers, Bill and Emma Lou Ray, pulled a couch, a gift from Shaunte to her daughter. In the car behind, the rest of her Stand in the Gap team, Larry and Georgiann O'Mealey, prayed for the new relationship of this family that had been separated so long.

Emma Lou remembers that afterwards, as they drove away, "I think we all felt that God was washing away the empty years and filling in the spaces."

Within this budding family relationship, there have been difficult conversations, but there have also been Christmas gifts, the joy of a three-year-old grandchild being loved by her grandmother, and a whole lot of prayer. "There's a generational curse that has been broken," says Shaunte, "we just have to walk it out."

For Shaunte, it's difficult to describe her relationship with her Stand in the Gap small group and even harder to put into words the impact they have had on her life. When she tries, she says, "When we meet together and I feel that love that is unconditional, and we are working out these problems with the practical knowledge they have of living life, and my life that has never really been lived, it's like it makes me whole. It makes my heart whole. It makes me feel like the daughter that God came for me to be."